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THE PROVIDENCE SCHOOL CENSUS SYSTEM

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A school census has been taken for many years in several states. In Rhode Island cities and towns, for more than forty years, an annual census has been taken, in January, of all children from five to fifteen years of age, inclusive.

Of late, the school census has come to be regarded as an excellent aid in determining the thoroughness of execution of compulsory attendance laws and laws regarding child labor, and in measuring the necessity for additional schoolhouses and teachers. Yet if this census is slovenly taken, and is to any great extent incomplete, it becomes misleading and worse than useless for these purposes.

When we assumed, in Providence, some fifteen years ago, the supervision of taking the school census, a casual inspection of returns of enumerators convinced us that it was incomplete. For many years our registrar of births has been in a marked degree energetic in his work. Aided by laws requiring physicians and midwives to report all births and providing for fees for the performance of their duties, and by a semi-annual census of births, his record of births is remarkably correct. A study of the birth and death returns, and other available data, led us to believe that the school census enumeration was fully six per cent. less than it ought to be, and in a thorough investigation which we instituted, more than five-sixths of the loss we had estimated, we found, had been omitted in the enumeration.

In considering the matter, we came to believe that the enumerators were honest, and that their failure to obtain a complete census came from the difficulty of obtaining full reports from parents and from failing to discover unusual places of abode. Many janitors and watchmen were found living in business blocks and recent immigrants in deserted workshops and buildings.

The refusal of parents to give full information was and continues to be the most potent difficulty. Some persons, while fulfilling their parental duties of care and education, have an ardent

hatred of governmental inquisition, and resent census inquiries as trenching upon their personal concerns. Many persons evade these inquiries, fearing some ulterior design for restricting their control of their children, especially in matters of employment. Some, if they can satisfy the enumerator by reporting two of their five children, chuckle over the smart trick by which they have saved time to return to more congenial occupations. Many parents who are keeping older children at home to care for younger ones, will refuse to report such children for fear they will be ordered into school.

The danger from an incomplete school census is that a large majority of children not enumerated are precisely the children for whose benefit attendance and labor laws are enacted. If we could have the enumeration of the missing, we could afford to do without the enumeration of the others.

To meet these difficulties as far as possible, we adopted a plan which, with slight modifications, has been followed since, and has, we believe, been efficient and profitable in many ways. This is what we call our preliminary census. As necessary to its success, the truancy laws were so amended as to require from all private schools precisely similar reports regarding attendance of pupils as were required from public schools, also to require all employers of children under sixteen years to report complete lists of such children and their addresses to the truant officer upon his request—not oftener than twice a year. We also diligently endeavored to create such a disposition among teachers and police officers as would lead them to cheerfully disclose to the truant officer names and addresses of all children known to them to attend no school. Not only have we secured such assistance from teachers and officers, but it is not uncommon for citizens to report children moving into their neighborhood and not attending school. If it is clearly understood that no harsh methods without adequate relief of distress or poverty will be taken in the compulsory processes applied to these cases, such reports will be full and adequate.

About the middle of each December, teachers in public and private schools are requested to report on slips all children belonging to their schools, with such details of additional information required; employers of children are requested to report all children employed by them; the names of all children holding working cer-

tificates are copied upon slips; the names of all Providence children in homes or reformatories are similarly copied, and a request is made to all teachers and pupils for names of children who for any reason do not attend school.

All names and addresses so obtained, properly copied upon slips, are then sorted and arranged by addresses. When the enumerator begins his work in January he is furnished with a street book of his territory showing how many children should be found in every tenement at any given number of any given street. If he reports he cannot find as many children at any place as were indicated, a hunt for the missing children is instituted from the office.

When the house-to-house enumerators have returned their slips, they are arranged, examined and tabulated according to the provisions of the law. All children returned by enumerators, except new five-year-olds, not previously known to us, are immediately located and proper action taken. We make the following tabulations of each census:

Number of boys enumerated.

Number of girls enumerated.

Total enumerated.

Number attending public schools.

Number attending Catholic schools.

Number attending other private schools.

Number attending no school.

Class I. Children five years old, admitted only to kindergartens in the public schools.

Class II. Children six years old, admitted to primary schools, but attendance not compulsory.

Class III. Children seven years old and under fourteen, attendance compulsory.

Class IV. Children fourteen years old, whose attendance at school is compulsory unless lawfully employed, or unless they have completed the course of study of primary and grammar schools.

Class V. Children fifteen years old, whose attendance is not compulsory.

In each of the classes is given the total number enumerated; number attending some school; number attending no school; number attending only part of the year and average number of months' attendance; percentages and comparisons with previous year.

A tabulation is also made by wards and sexes.

The children of compulsory attendance ages reported as attending no school comprise graduates of grammar schools who do not care to attend, cripples, chronic invalids, feeble-minded and those who have escaped the truant officer and the school authorities. We compel attendance of the deaf at our institute for the deaf. The blind are cared for by the state at the Perkins Institute in Boston. We hope soon to be able to care for all feeble-minded at our state school, recently established. The percentage of this class last year was reported as 1.2. A careful scrutiny of the report last year disclosed only thirty-four who had escaped the truant officer and school authorities, and they were immediately sent to school.

As lawfully bound, we report as authoritative returns of the school census only information given to the enumerators at the homes of the children; when found to be incorrect, corrections are made at the homes upon second call.

The one great defect of the school census is that ages are given only in years. We have not yet succeeded in getting the state to ask for the date of birth instead of "years old", perhaps from fear that the enumerators might get entangled in arithmetical snarls or that clerks might be unable to make tabulations.

It is very important that persons employed in school census work should be as experienced and skillful as possible and familiar both with their work and their field. We make only such changes in our force as necessity requires. Our clerks are skilled in working with names, streets, wards and tabulations, and our enumerators are almost constantly employed in work on other censuses, poll tax, births, militia, etc., and in work on voting lists and directories. In some cases they are versed in the languages of the foreign-born in their sections, and whenever it is necessary we provide competent interpreters to others. Nearly all of the present force have been many years in the service, and no vacancies have ever been filled through political influence.